PHILOSOPHY *IN* PHILOSOPHY IN SCHOOLS

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There has recently been a great deal written about philosophy in schools and in this article I shall be addressing some of the main concerns raised in objection to philosophy with young people. By young people I have in mind those in primary school from reception through to Year 6 (ages 4–11).

Philosophy in schools has been dominated by the P4C movement that was begun by Matthew Lipman in the 1960's. The model for philosophy with children instigated by Lipman is sometimes known as a *community of enquiry*. In a community of enquiry the children sit in a circle with a facilitator. They are then presented with a stimulus of some sort (a story, picture or DVD extract for example) from which they are encouraged to generate questions. These questions are then put to a vote and they discuss the question voted for.

One objection that has been raised is that this is not genuine philosophy and a connected question that I will address in this article is: does the facilitator need to know philosophy in order to do philosophy with children?

I will argue that the philosophy done in a community of enquiry is philosophy only in a very tenuous sense, but I will also argue that philosophy can be done with children very successfully and that it is essential for the facilitator to know philosophy in order to do philosophy with children. I shall also end by sharing a personal view about the worth of doing philosophy at all with young people.

Can children do philosophy and if so is the philosophy that is currently done with children genuine?

Children say the funniest things, they also say interesting things and they often express themselves in very original

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language. This of course does not make them philosophers. Children also have a habit of asking an awful lot of questions but neither does this make them philosophers. Some writers on this subject have suggested that certain kinds of questions make children philosophers. I argue that it is not the question but the treatment of the question that makes the child-philosopher.

'How do I know everything isn't just a dream?'

I would like to take a closer look at a question and some of the concomitant responses offered by children and often quoted as examples of children doing philosophy.

If a child asks something like, A: 'How do I know everything isn't just a dream?' this may seem superficially like a philosophical question but it does not make the speaker a philosopher. However, I believe it can show a philosophical *disposition*, but at this stage – as John White has suggested – there needs to be a demonstrable philosophical *intention* and a superficial resemblance to a philosophical question does not entail philosophical intention. If the child responds to their own question with something like, B: 'If I pinch myself then I would wake up, so I know I am not dreaming,' this is clearly more philosophical: they have asked a question about the nature of things and have attempted to answer it through the use of reason. As you can see, the reason has failed, but I do not think this necessarily shows that it is not philosophy, as many philosophers' reasons also fail. It is not the success of the reasoning that makes philosophy, but the manner in which the reasoning is done. As P. F. Strawson remarks, in his essay *Self, Mind and Body*, 'One of the marks…of a really great philosopher is to make a really great mistake.' What makes comments like this philosophy is not the quality of or the intention behind the starting statements but the subsequent treatment and emerging intention the comment then receives in a discussion. If someone were then to point out, for instance, (as has been done in some of my sessions) that

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C: 'you could be dreaming that you pinched yourself,' (or some other formulation to this effect) this demonstrates a much deeper philosophical awareness of the discussion.

So the sort of comments at A and B can be described as 'pre-philosophy' and in my view the P4C movement engenders and nurtures a pre-philosophical disposition in the children taking part. At C I think we are seeing something more like genuine philosophy being done. Some philosophical sophistication has been demonstrated and therefore philosophical intention is beginning to emerge.

A session following The Philosophy Shop model

The following is a description of a session where a group of *Gifted and Talented* Year 5 children are thinking their way around the *Ship of Theseus* thought-experiment (this was midway through their first year of working with me). Here is the thought-experiment as it was presented to them:

> Imagine a ship that has been built of wood, and each time a part needs replacing it is replaced by metal parts. Eventually, the entire ship is made of metal. Is it the same ship as it was when it was wood? If not, then at what point did it become the new ship?

C——r began by saying that in one way it is the same ship and in another it is different: it has the same *name* but has different *parts*. He has begun by, straight away, identifying complexities in the possible answers, by seeing the ambiguities.

Philosophers distinguish between two kinds of sameness: *numerical* and *qualitative* sameness. *Numerical* says that something is 'one and the same thing' whereas *qualitative* says that something has the same qualities but may be comprised of different parts. C——r has shown an instinct for this kind of distinction though it is not exactly parallel.

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A—n dares to venture a categorical answer. He says that the moment a plank has been replaced it is a different ship. This is viewed as controversial by the other group-members.

The group has fallen into two camps: the first says that it has the same name, has the same crew, and makes the same journey with the same cargo so it is the same ship. (We might call this a *functional argument* as it says that as long as the ship performs the same functions then it is the same ship.) One of the children adds that it is still a ship. The other camp say that it is a different ship though they can't agree at what point it becomes different. The basic idea is that it has changed and a changed ship is a different ship.

A—n then provides a powerful counter-example to the *functional argument*. He says the maker of the ship could have made six ships exactly the same, given them the same job and even given them the same name, but we wouldn't say that they are the same ship. One of them adds to this and asks rhetorically, 'Would people with the same *name* be the same person?'

Thomas Hobbes, in his own discussion about the same thought experiment, came up with a similar objection to the intuition that it is the same ship even when all the parts have been replaced. He asks us to imagine that as the wooden planks are removed they are themselves reassembled to make a ship. At the end of the process we are left with two ships. Hobbes suggests that it would be absurd to entertain that they are the same ship. A—n's argument bares some resemblance to Hobbes' argument.

This is a good opportunity to personalise the discussion. I ask them to pull a hair out (if they want). C——r pulls out three hairs and looks at them quizzically. I ask whether, by pulling out the three hairs, he has changed. If he has changed is he a different person?

Following some discussion that reveals their understanding and consternation regarding the puzzle I then further the analogy with the Ship of Theseus by explaining that scientists tell us that every seven years all the cells in our

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bodies are replaced (a quick discussion ensues about what 'cells' are – they seem to know). The question is: *does this mean that every seven years we are completely new people from who we were seven years before?* Provocatively I suggest that A—n's camp are committed to saying that they are completely different people even when they lose just three hairs. They are amused by this but seem determined to get out of it!

T—a is uncomfortable with the analogy and says that people are different from objects. However, she is unable to say why.

D——l comes to her rescue and says even though C—r has lost three hairs he still comes from the same parents.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* John Locke argued that what identifies a *body* through time is its 'point of origin'.

This seems an appropriate time to introduce the children to John Locke and explain his theory as simply as possible: 'He said that how we know if something is the same thing is if it came from the same place – the same 'point of origin''

A—n then pipes up with 'but my sister and I are both from the same parents but we are not the same person.' This is an excellent challenge to D——l's idea.

I ask them how John Locke might answer this. I repeat his idea. What do they think he would say?

To my amazement J—a, who had remained very quiet up to this point said that although A—n and his sister had both come from the same parents they had not been born at the same point in time.

The insight spiralled from there.

Next, someone said, 'what about twins?' and B–e responded that they have the same parents and come from the same point in time but they are not the same person. J——n added, 'They don't have the same body.'

'What about conjoined twins?' said someone.

'They have different brains.'

This took us to the end of the session, but it demonstrated an assimilation of John Locke's idea such that they

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could offer more subtle counter examples but could also see how they might fail to refute Locke's condition.

The last twist came from A—n as the group was leaving the room. He came up to me and said, 'Mr. Worley, can I say something?'

'Go for it!' I said.

'I think it's not our bodies that make us the same person, it's our personalities.'

Although Locke thought that the 'point of origin' determined the identity of *bodies* through time he provided a separate account of how a *person* is identified through time. He thought that the essential element was 'continued consciousness'. A—n's last insight had moved him in a similar direction to Locke in that he was dissatisfied with the body-account of identity through change and was looking to more internal features of personhood.

In another more recent Year 5 group discussion this has been furthered in that they spent less time on a body-account and more on the internal features of personhood. In this session Z–k provided the group with an insight comparable to a *computational theory of mind*. He said that the body is like the *hardware* of a computer and the personality/mind is like the *software*. This enabled the group to list the features of personhood according to this distinction. So under *software* they listed: 'personality', 'memory', 'your heart' (this was meant metaphorically for the *spirit* or *emotions* not for the organ), and under *hardware* they listed: 'body', 'molecules', 'cells'.

With the community-of-enquiry-approach the sorts of skills the children are learning are as follows: speaking and listening, social skills, democratic processes, basic reasoning skills like how to agree and disagree and link comments to others. But philosophy is more than this. To be doing philosophy one also needs to be engaged in special kinds of thinking and discourse such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, more complex reasoning, second order/meta-level thinking etc. It is not easy to engage children in these kinds of levels of thinking, but I do believe the

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session-description above demonstrates children doing a kind of philosophy recognisable to an academic philosopher where a P4C demonstration would not.

There is an oft-used quote from Plato that is used to demonstrate the link between children and philosophy: 'philosophy begins in wonder,' and I think the quote is often used misleadingly. I agree that philosophy does *begin* in wonder but I would argue that it is not the *same thing* as wonder. So to say that children are in a natural state of wonder – which I think they often are – is not the same as saying that children are natural philosophers. The most one can say is that they have a pre-disposition *towards* philosophy and would therefore be receptive to a properly put-together and appropriately-aimed programme of philosophy led by a skilled guide.

Do the practitioners of philosophy with children need to know philosophy?

If we return for a moment to the discussion at A, B and C what I am *not* saying is that philosophy as described there is never done in P4C but I *am* saying that from a methodological point of view that would very much depend on contingent factors such as the instinctive philosophical awareness of both the children and the facilitator, and I argue that that is not good enough – it needs to be more consistent than that. The facilitator needs a little more than an *accidental* philosophical awareness. I doubt very much that the sort of philosophy described in the *Ship of Theseus* example is done by those trained in P4C without a supplementary formal education in philosophy.

I am also aware that the facilitators of P4C, though not philosophers, are provided with basic philosophical training, but this extends to no more than a few days, and although there *are* those who gain something substantial from this training there are many more who – at the end of their few days – have no more an idea of the subtleties of

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philosophical thinking than before they did the training. This will be no surprise to those who it may have taken months or years to finally 'get philosophy' at university. If the children are to benefit in a similar way, in other words, to gain a subtle understanding (for their age) of philosophy over a period of years of doing it, then to ensure that this is achieved the practitioner must not only know what philosophy is but also have an understanding of the sorts of subtleties involved in a study of philosophy at an academic level. The sort of subtleties I am talking about, for example, are the differences between a *logical* idea and an *empirical* one, or of *a priori* and *a posteriori* reasoning or the difference between *counter-factual* and *factual* arguments. For instance, a child can argue consistently about something that is not actually true because they have expressed their idea in a hypothetical form (if. . .then. . .). I have seen teachers object to this sort of reasoning because they believed the facts in the child's idea were not true. A philosopher would know that the facts do not necessarily matter if the child is thinking in counter-factuals, what matters is the logical consistency of the argument.

It is true that in order to be achieving the sorts of aims shown under a community of enquiry the facilitator needs some training but does not need any specialist philosophical knowledge, but in order to be doing the sorts of things listed under 'philosophy' the practitioner needs to have a more sophisticated subject knowledge. You would not ask someone who knew nothing about maths to teach maths and you would not ask someone who knew nothing of history to teach history, so why is it supposed that someone who knows nothing (or at most very little) about philosophy can do philosophy with children?

One may argue that the facilitators in P4C are not teachers of philosophy but merely co-enquirers with the children into different subjects and that this does not require specialist philosophical knowledge. But this is simply not philosophy. It is true that some of the starting points of philosophy have a lot in common with everyday

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questions that people ask, but that does not mean that philosophers would answer or explore those questions in the same way. I believe a *community of enquiry* is a valuable pursuit but that it should not be called 'philosophy', not at least without some follow-up for their later years in primary school doing real philosophy.

I think it can be expressed in Platonic terms by reference to his *paradox of enquiry*. According to this it is impossible to enquire into something if we know nothing of the thing we are enquiring into. If nobody in an enquiring group knows what philosophy is it would surely be very difficult to do philosophy. The children certainly do not know what it is, especially at the beginning stages, so it is essential that the practitioner does know what philosophy is. There are two important reasons – that are connected to the problems in Plato's paradox – why I think this should be the case. A practitioner not skilled in philosophy will be unable to:

1) Steer the discussion towards a more philosophical level
2) Notice when the children have done so themselves

By way of an example I would now like to return to the demonstration of philosophical awareness at C. For the benefits of this philosophical insight to be properly exploited I think the facilitator needs to be aware of exactly what it is about this insight that is philosophically valuable. In my experience many of those untrained in philosophy would be satisfied with A, B or C as a demonstration of philosophy and therefore unable to guide the discussion philosophically any further. A is philosophical only in form and resemblance; A and B together show a reasoned attempt to answer the question, but C provides a challenge to the reasoning at B and therefore both an understanding of the reasoning but also an ability to discern that the reasoning has failed to satisfactorily answer A. It also shows a facility for the sort of thinking required to grasp the subtleties

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of the sceptical position in philosophical epistemology, although of course, it has not in itself yet gone that far. Those involved in a discussion like this that fail to grasp these subtleties usually make the mistake of assuming something in the reality they are questioning as a proof that it could not possibly be a dream, assuming the very thing that is being questioned. The response at C shows a formative awareness of this subtlety.

Solution and reconcilement

The difficulty with defining what philosophy is stems from the word 'philosophy' itself and how it is used in modern English. For the purposes of this discussion I shall suggest that it is a word with two very different senses: the first we may call *informal philosophy* and it is that which is done when one or more persons engage in an enquiry with an aim to exploring the issue under consideration. This can be anything from a classroom discussion to a pub debate or meanderings on the meaning of life in a spiritualist meditation group. All that is often said about any special character of this kind of discussion by those doing informal philosophy is that the questions are *unanswerable* and that the opinions of those engaged in this kind of philosophy are such that they cannot be 'right' or 'wrong'. The second we shall call *formal philosophy* and this is best exemplified by the academic pursuit of topics such as *metaphysics*, *ethics*, *epistemology*, etc. (comprising the list I provided earlier.) Very much more is said about the character of discussion had in formal philosophy. It is often of a *general* nature and is concerned with *logical consequences* and not so much with *empirical* considerations (though empirical questions are sometimes considered but from a logical point of view); it is largely concerned with *concepts* and *meaning*, but, very importantly, formal philosophy is regulated by a very rigorous application of the use of *reason* to assess the validity of claims made by philosophers: this therefore means

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that philosophers can be considered 'right' or 'wrong' in their reasoning. This is an important aspect of academic philosophy that I wish to carry over to the work I do with children and it is a significant difference between the two kinds of philosophy. If at all, P4C can be said to be 'philosophy' only in the *informal* sense of the word.

I see no reason why the two kinds of philosophy (both informal and formal) cannot co-exist in that an informal approach to philosophy may be a very suitable way to start with very young children (reception through to Years 1). However, I think that this should be supplemented with a continuing philosophy programme for Years 2 through to 6 modelled on the academic approach, though resembling the *community of enquiry* in format.

A personal view and the 'should' of philosophy in schools

It is all very well saying that children can do philosophy and that for it to be done properly the practitioners should be skilled in philosophy, but we still have not answered the elephant at the back of the class: *why should* we do philosophy with children? Are there any good reasons for doing philosophy with children? And as Michael Hand has rightly asked, are there any *intrinsic* reasons for doing philosophy aside from the extrinsic reasons often offered such as improving general pupil performance in schools?

In answer to the last point there is already some research to support the view that philosophy is worth doing because it increases IQ and promotes certain speaking and listening skills as well as sustained reasoning skills over time (Trickey and Topping 2007), but I would also like to share a personal view while at the same time paving the way for more research to be done that might shed some empirical light on what are currently my intuitions and observations on this topic having been doing philosophy with children for the best part of the past seven years.

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I would also like to see some research that looked in to the *intrinsic* value of philosophy using a different model to supplement the research already done (mentioned above) which used the P4C model.

Britain is currently suffering from a climate of anti-intellectualism and I believe this is sustained by a trickle-down effect from parents to their children. Many adults have an irrational fear of (sometimes even antipathy towards) certain subjects that are seen as especially intellectual, and *mathematics* and *philosophy* are probably the best examples of subjects seen in this light. Also there are many who are *de facto* unable to effectively take part in the democratic process because of a limited understanding of politics and the political process and find themselves *inheriting* political (as well as religious) views from a group they identify with such as their family or class. I also believe that this is more prevalent in the working classes than in the middle classes sustained by a very old and ingrained class system.

Politics, maths and philosophy are often seen as the domain of the middle classes and therefore it seems that many of those not in these groups find the intellectual process inaccessible to them. I argue that a grounding in philosophy from primary school onwards has the potential to unlock these intellectual doors to many otherwise potentially disenfranchised citizens. I believe that philosophy has the ability to increase the autonomy of the citizens of any democratic society and the *positive freedom* of individuals. I could be understood to be calling for something like a quiet, intellectual revolution in education. It is perhaps time to move away from the emphasis in education on *vocation*, *employability* and *material wealth*, as this has the unhappy consequence of promoting the sorts of values that lead to dissatisfaction such as *instrumentalism*, *relativism* and *individualism* at the exclusion of all others. By re-introducing a prominent place for the liberal arts – at least *alongside* the vocational values – we at the same time, promote more wholesome values such as *ethical-ism*, *community-ism*, *appreciation-ism* and *altruism* so that we don't have a society that is like an extended episode

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of Big Brother. This is another – but equally powerful – argument for the intrinsic value of putting philosophy at the heart of our education system.

Children have the benefit of not having any preconceptions of intellectual pursuits and are therefore perfect candidates for initiation into a subject like philosophy. The habituation of the philosophical process at primary school level I see as an excellent way to inure the children against negative outlooks towards intellectualism and to activate an assessment-skill that can be used in any context be it political, religious or other. There is potentially no intellectual forum closed to anyone who has assimilated philosophical reasoning methods.

By the time the students who have participated in a philosophy programme in primary school reach a mature age and are engaging with adult themes for themselves they will already be used to long words and complex, abstract reasoning regardless of their family or class background, they should therefore feel no barrier between themselves and any kind of intellectual exchange.

Peter Worley is the founder of The Philosophy Shop*, which is committed to bringing philosophy to the community in a number of ways. He is a trained philosophical counsellor, and works in fourteen primary schools in Lewisham, South East London having pioneered his own programme of philosophy with children. He also runs training courses in philosophical consultancy in schools as well as courses in philosophy for the general public. For more information visit www.thephilosophyshop.co.uk*

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